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Deciding on a Major At Western

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Deciding on a Major at Western
Report 1995-01

Carl Simpson
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October, 1995

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DECIDING ON A MAJOR AT WESTERN

Introduction

Choosing a major has always been one of the major hurdles college students face. Currently, it may be even more problematic than usual. The decision retains its career and life planning implications, and there is some evidence that this is a time of relative indecision in this regard. Students report wanting more advising than they are getting; many report being at college without a definite idea why; there is less popular push to any one type of major than previously --no 1980s panic to get into business, no 1970s stampede into professional schools, no 1960s drive to social relevance. Student fluctuations between majors is rapid and difficult to predict. As always, students change majors quite often during college, although Western faces the special difficulty that it does not influence the primary period of choice for about half its students: those who enter as transfers.

At the same time, beginning a major has powerful meaning for many Western students. Previous assessment studies at Western have documented a dramatic increase in academic engagement (time spent studying; satisfaction with courses) when students move from GURs to a major. Similarly, many students feel they are not "making solid progress toward the degree" until they have chosen a major and are taking courses in the major (Simpson, Matson and Clark, forthcoming).

In addition, political and economic pressures now embed each basic decision students make in a system of constraints and concerns about time-to-degree and efficient use of resources. The university has entertained the policy of requiring students to declare a major at a certain time, since delaying that choice cuts off many options because sequencing requirements cannot be met, and previous assessment studies at Western have demonstrated that delaying the major decision increases the overall time to degree as well as the number of credits accumulated on the way to the degree. Students now give explicit attention to the time it takes to complete a degree when they choose a major. The university has been forced to respond to imbalances between students' desires for certain degrees and size of the faculty in those departments by imposing limits that perforce deny access to some students who wish these majors. The university has created an enrollment management group to examine issues of "efficiency." The Registrar has necessarily become more and more involved in developing ways to increase student access to courses in their majors. Assessment reports concerning advising and a Provost's Taskforce on Advising at Western have focused in part on difficulties in reaching and advising students concerning their choice of majors. The Academic Coordinating Commission has proposed a new "general studies" major tailored for students who face difficulty gaining admission into one of the departmental majors.

This flurry of policy activity and student concern around the issue of choosing a major makes obvious the value of more information on the process and timing of students' choice of major fields. The current report draws on some information from previous follow-up surveys of Western graduates and three 1994-95 "close-in" surveys of currently enrolled Western students to offer such information.

Findings

Nearly all the analyses in this report are based on data from four surveys: our 1994 follow-up of the Class of '93 and our three 1994-95 "close-in" surveys of enrolled students, described in the preface to this report. Findings are reported for a broad lay audience; readers interested in more technical issues such as statistical tests of significance may contact the authors.

When do Western Students Decide on Majors?

Most students make the final choice of major fields in the late sophomore or early junior years. When the Class of '93 looked back on their time at Western, 41.9% reported that they chose the major in which they graduated during their junior year and 32.2% in their sophomore year (see Table 1). These figures are virtually unchanged since the class of '89, with whom we began collecting comparable data on Western alumni.

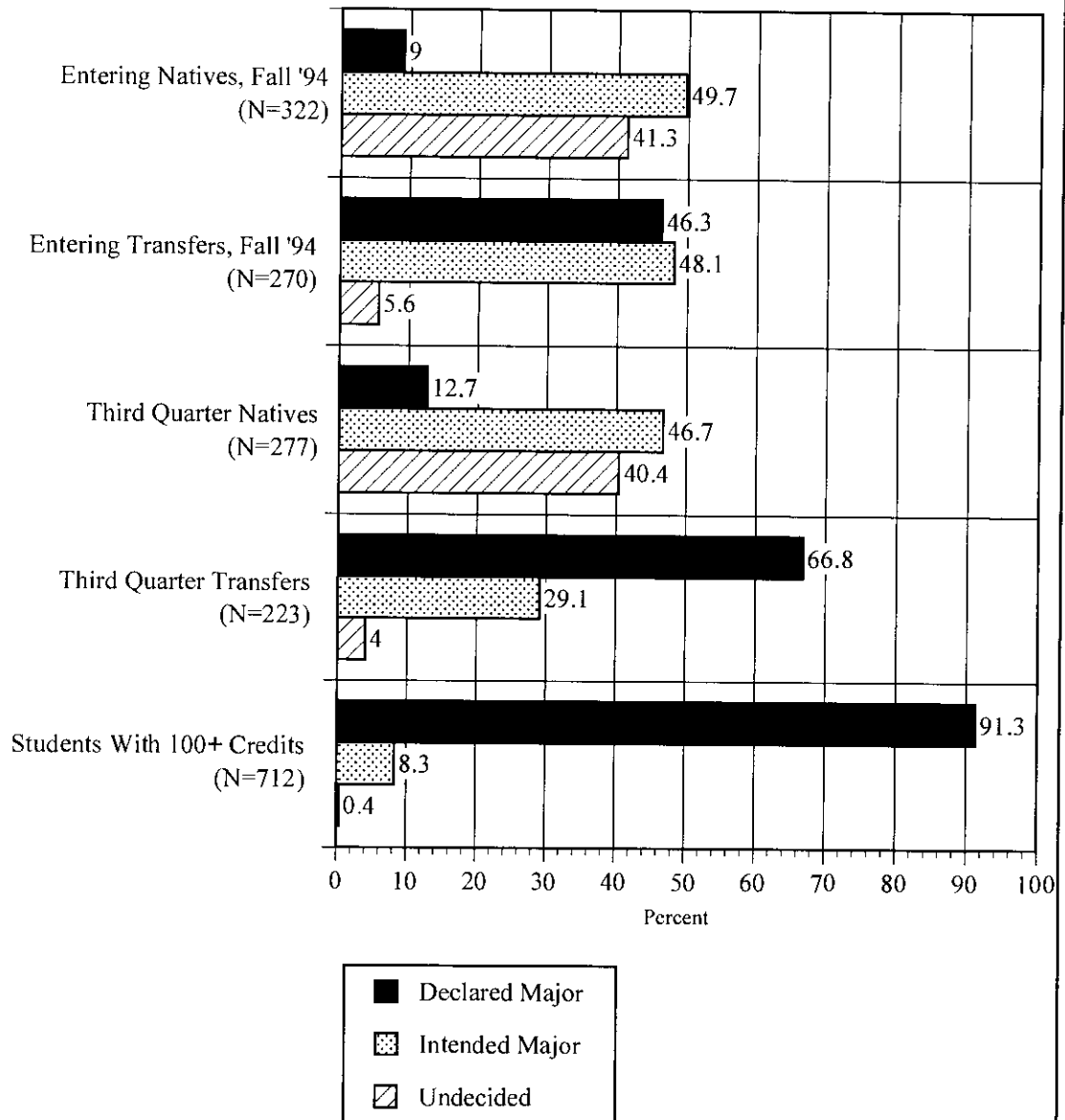
Table 1. When the Class of '93 Decided on the Major with which they Graduated

<u>Year in School</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Freshman	20.0
Sophomore	32.2
Junior	41.9
Senior	5.9
TOTAL	100.0 (N=1297)

Given that half of Western students choose a major during their freshman and sophomore years, it is logical that whether or not students enter Western with a major in mind depends heavily on whether they enter as native freshmen or as transfers. Figure 1 draws on our 1994-95 "close-in" surveys to measure how many entering freshmen and entering transfers have a definite

major in mind by the fifth week of their first quarter. Only nine percent of natives, but 46.3% of transfers have a “declared” major.¹ Similarly, two-fifths of natives but only one-in-twenty transfers feel “undecided” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Declaration of Major:
WWU Survey of Entering Students, Fall 1994,
Follow-up Survey, Spring, 1995
and Survey of Students with 100+ credits, Winter 1995



¹ Cross-checking with registrar's files shows that many of these students are not in fact officially declared. We assume, however, that when students report being “declared” as opposed to having an “intended” major, that they feel quite definite about their choice.

By Spring quarter, their third quarter at Western, the number of freshmen who have clarified their major choice is very small indeed; an additional 3.7% have moved into the "declared" category. For transfers, on the other hand, preference has become decision for 20.5%, so that two-thirds report having a definite major. Transfers are more often at the stage in their university "careers" where decision is called for.

It could perhaps be argued that Western natives time their decisions differently than transfers--that transfers change less often at Western not because they made their changes elsewhere, but because they decided earlier and changed less often. We have evidence that this is not the case. We asked our Class of '91 alumni whether they had a major in mind when they started school, whether at Western or not. The proportion of transfers who recalled having a major in mind when beginning school was precisely the same as the proportion of natives who had a major in mind when beginning Western. By the time transfers in that class entered Western, the proportion with a major in mind had, of course, increased. The issue is timing, not the school where one begins.

Figure 1 also reports the proportions of advanced juniors and seniors who have decided upon a major. All members of this sample had 100+ credits and had been at Western at least two quarters. Essentially all (99.6%) of this sample have declared a major or can identify an intended major, with 91.3% "declared." Perhaps contrary to expectation, the 8.7% who are not firm in their choice of major are not clustered in the junior year; they are spread across the spectrum from 100 credits to well over 200 credits. These individuals appear to fall into three categories: 1) a few who transferred into Western with many credits, often after taking a prolonged break from college, requiring them to essentially start over with decisions such as major fields, 2) students who have left other intended majors or were not admitted to other majors and who find themselves floating a bit at the point of our survey, and 3) students who are well along in their intended majors but simply have not yet declared

Another way of looking at the timing of decisions regarding majors is to ask how long students spend at Western before making their decision. Since college is no longer a four year process for the majority of students, native freshmen, especially, may explore a long time at Western before making a decision. We asked our sample of advanced juniors and seniors what year and quarter they decided on their major. From these results along with Registrar's records of quarters enrolled, we can calculate the precise number of quarters each student was enrolled before s/he decided on the current major. Since many of these students will again change their majors before graduating, these are underestimates of the eventual decision times for an entire cohort, but the findings are illustrative.

Two-thirds of AA transfers (68.2%) decided within their first three quarters at Western, whereas only 42.9% of non-AA transfers and 26.1% of native freshmen did so. Nearly all AA transfers (93.2%) had decided by the end of two years (six quarters enrolled); only half (49.1%) of natives had done so. Of non-AA transfers, 81.0% decided within two years and another 14.9% during the third year. Among natives, three fourths (76.1%) had decided within nine quarters, with another 12.4% during the fourth year, 2.9% during the fifth, and 1.3% during the sixth. These latter figures are underestimates to some unknown degree because some of these

students will change majors again before graduating. These figures hold implications for timing of advising needs, the opportunities Western has to influence Western decisions by natives and transfers, and the time lag of the impact on major departments from an increase in the number of students admitted as transfers or as natives.

A final question concerning the timing of major choice is what students believe to be the ideal timing. This issue is raised by a finding from an analysis of students' perceptions of "making progress toward the degree" (Simpson, Matson and Clark, forthcoming). The finding is that by their third quarter at Western, a large proportion of new freshmen felt that they were not making solid progress for the reason that they still had not selected a major. Although most students have not selected a permanent major by that time and over 40% have not even selected an intended field, many students were nonetheless feeling pressure to have decided. In addition, about half of Spring quarter freshmen say they need advising concerning requirements for admission to majors and selecting courses that logically prepare them for various majors. These findings point to a proviso concerning our reports about the timing of major decisions: the process of forming a decision is typically begun much earlier than when the final decision emerges.

The appearance that students feel pressure to decide earlier than most do, in fact, decide is confirmed by responses to a question asked of Spring quarter freshmen and transfers: "What do you think is the best time during college to choose a major?" Possible responses covered the period from freshman year to late junior year. Responses, displayed in Figure 2.

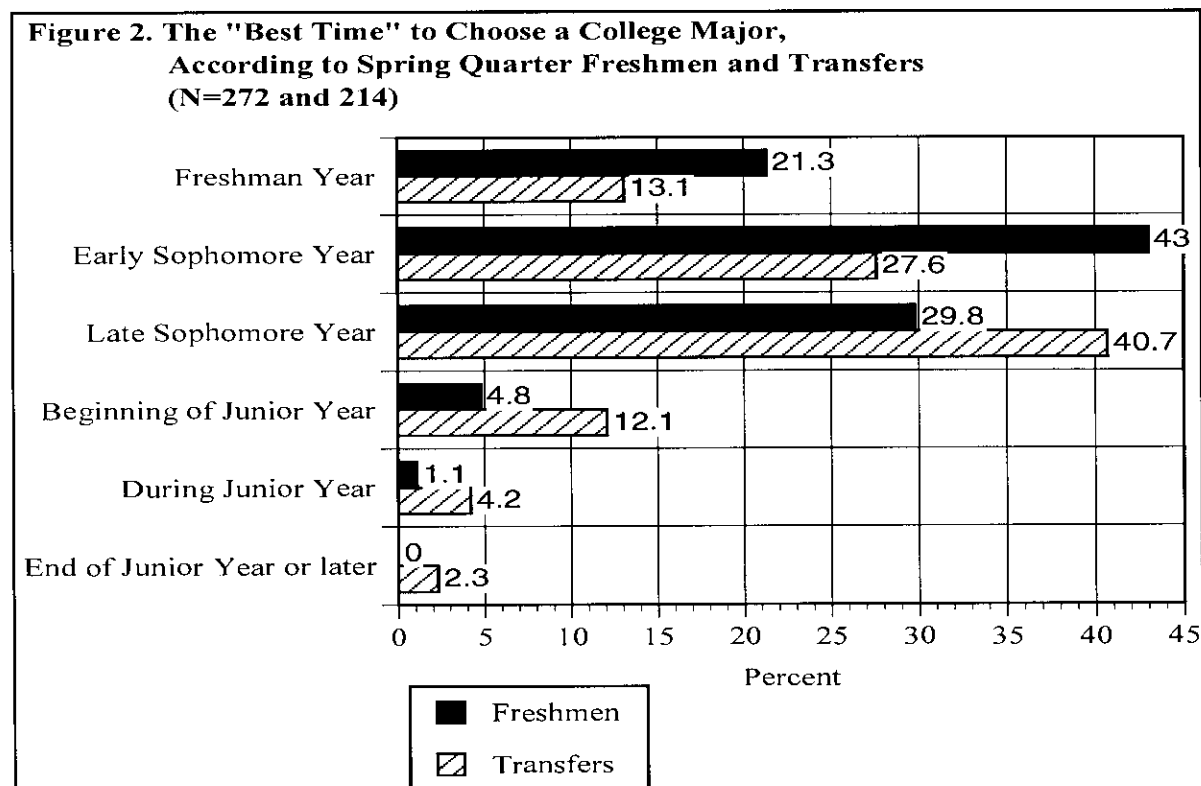


Figure 2 makes two things clear. First, students, especially native freshmen, believe they should ideally decide on a major considerably earlier than most do, in fact, choose a final major. Second, native freshmen, lacking the experience of their own and other students' timing of actual decisions, show a particular imbalance between ideal and real timing of decision making. Two-thirds (64.3%) believe they should have chosen a major by early sophomore year, and only one in 20 feels it is ideal to decide any time in the junior year - the modal year for actual decisions. Given this pressure from their perceptions of the ideal, it becomes much more understandable that these students are experiencing discomfort late in their freshman years, reporting that they are making poor progress because they have not yet decided on a major.

Changing Majors at Western

About three-fifths of entering freshmen have identified an intended major. On the other hand, only one-fifth of all graduates look back to say that their final major was decided during their freshman year. What of the other two-fifths? They, and many others, change majors at least once during their college careers. Two-fifths (40.2%) of all Western graduates report that they changed majors at least once while they were at Western. Figures are, of course, much higher for Freshmen than for transfers, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2. Number of Times Changed Majors while at Western, by Entry Status, Class of '93

<u>How Often Changed Majors</u>	<u>Entry Status</u>		
	<u>Native</u>	<u>Trans.w/AA</u>	<u>Trans.w/o AA</u>
<u>Never</u>	46.3	75.3	64.0
<u>Once</u>	27.8	17.0	23.4
<u>Twice</u>	15.0	6.0	9.9
<u>Three times+</u>	10.9	1.7	2.7
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	(N=615)	(N=466)	(N=222)

Whether native freshmen's first intended major is decided before they enter Western or after they are at Western for a period, the majority will change majors at least once while at Western (see Table 2).² One-fourth (25.9%) will change at least twice before settling on a final

² The question read: "How many times, if at all, did you change your intended major while at Western?"

major field. Transfers with the AA have completed much more of their exploration by the time they reach Western. Three-fourths never change their intended majors while at Western, a figure made more powerful by the fact that more than 95.0% of them have an intended major when they enter Western. That is, they have decided before entering and they do not change after arriving. Transfers without the AA, many of whom enter with fewer than 90 credits or enter after taking a break that interrupts the major choice process, are intermediate between native freshmen and AA transfers (see Table 2).

In short, among native freshmen, there is "a whole lot of changing going on." Just over 40.0% of all native freshmen develop their first intended major in their sophomore year or later. Although nearly 60.0% enter with at least an intended major, about half will change it at least once, so that only about 25-30.0% of native freshmen graduate with a major that they intended when they entered Western. Another 15-20.0% develop a first preference during sophomore year or later and do not change it.³ Among the remaining 54.0% or so, the average number of major changes is, conservatively, 1.8. Thus, in a typical current graduating class containing about 1100 native freshmen, about 1510 decisions of what field to major in were made--440 initial decisions and 1070 change decisions. Further, we show evidence below that alumni somewhat underestimate the number of changes they actually made as undergraduates, making these numbers low..

Transfers have finished most of their changing before arriving at Western. Extremely few initial decisions are made at Western, and a minority change their initial orientations after arriving at Western. According to alumni memories, in a typical graduating class, the 1200 or so who entered Western as transfers would have generated only about 520 major decisions (new or changes) while at Western.

We can also examine two other aspects of changing majors. The first involves transfers only. We asked transfers in the Class of '91 alumni survey what major they had had in mind, if any, when they first began school elsewhere, and then when they entered Western. The proportion who recalled having a preferred major at the outset of school was 70.5%; upon entering Western, the figure was 81.8%.⁴ Among the 70.5% who initially had a planned major upon beginning school, nearly half (45.7%) had changed that major by the time they entered Western. Among the 29.5% who had no initial major, one-third (38.3%) developed a major before entering Western.

We can also use our 1994-95 "close-in" surveys to examine how many new Fall freshmen and transfers changed their intended majors by Spring, their third quarter at Western. These data suffer no bias from recall, involving on-the-spot measurement during Fall and Spring quarters. Of those who had a firm or intended major in mind when they entered Western, nearly half (45.1%)

³ These figures are estimated by combining data from different sources. We will have longitudinal data confirming precise figures after following our Fall, 1994 sample of entering students through their careers at Western.

⁴ These figures are higher than those reported in Figure 1. The reason may be that current students are deciding more slowly, but other data indicate not. More likely, retrospective memory biases the results toward earlier clarity or the different wording of the question, asking if students had "a major field of study in mind" was softer, allowing more "yes" answers.

had changed that major by Spring quarter. More specifically, 54.4% of native freshmen with an intended major in Fall changed it by Spring, and 38.0% of transfers did so.

These figures, reflecting change over only a six month period, suggest greater volatility than students' reports of major changes when they look back as alumni. One might argue that the figures would look different if we examined only those most firm in their decisions--those who reported a "declared" major during Fall quarter, as opposed to "declared" and "intended" majors. For Transfers, change is, in fact, slightly lower among those with "declared" majors--30.7% change, as opposed to 38.0% among "declared" and "intended." Only 21 freshmen in our sample reported declared majors, but among these, 57.0% changed by Spring, the same rate as among all with intended majors.

Only after further follow-ups of this cohort will we have firmer measurement of the proportion who change majors throughout their time at Western, but this preliminary evidence suggests considerably more frequent changing than our alumni surveys uncovered. In particular, alumni data show less than 30% of transfers ever changing majors at Western, whereas our longitudinal measurement of intended majors demonstrates that during the first six months at Western, 38% of transfers have already made at least one change. If anything, then, the figures presented in Table 2 are underestimates.

An additional type of finding concerning the timing of major decisions is now available from our Winter, 1995 survey of advanced juniors and seniors. We have never before asked specifically which quarter major decisions were accomplished. Are junior year decisions made primarily in Fall quarter? Is summer a time of reflection resulting in decisions? Findings are clear. Nearly half (48.8%) report that they decided on their current majors during a Fall quarter. The proportion falls each subsequent quarter, to a low of 4.3% during summers. The pattern is virtually identical for transfers and native freshmen. The earlier in the student career one decided on the current major, the more likely the decision was to have been made in Fall.⁵

We also asked in what year advanced juniors and seniors selected their current majors. Underscoring the fact that college is no longer a four year event for most students, we have upper division students enrolled in this one quarter, Winter, 1995, who decided on their current majors under several different college catalogues. Six percent decided in 1989 or 1990; another 32.9% decided in 1991 or 1992; 58.5% decided in 1993 or 1994; and a final 2.4% had decided during the quarter of the survey (Winter, 1995). While we normally think of time-to-degree questions in terms of years until the labor market, etc., this particular window opens up a different picture--one showing complexity for departmental planning and curricular change, for students' continuity, and for advising stemming from a six year spread of entry points to the major among currently enrolled majors.

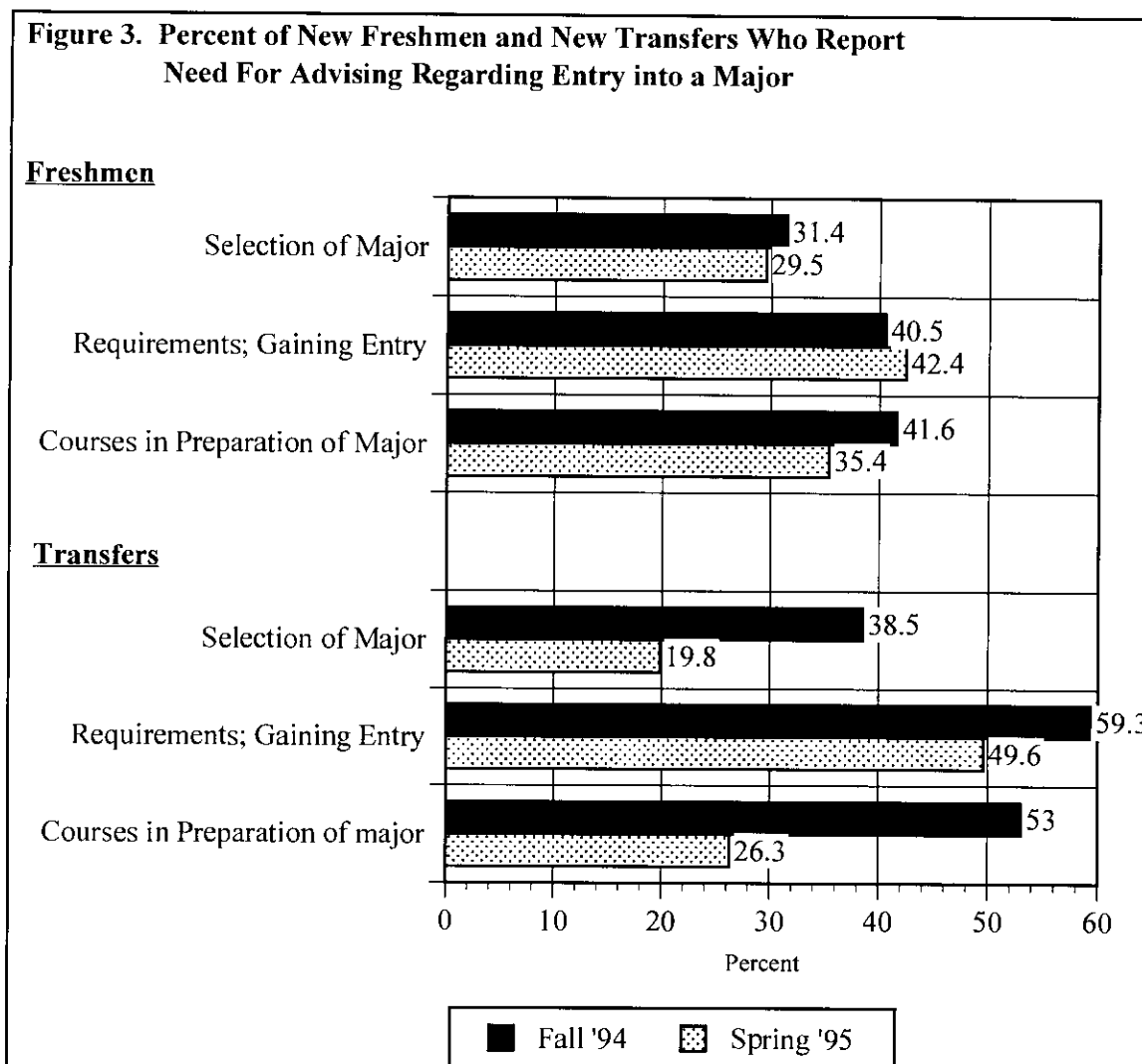
The Need for Advising Concerning the Major

We asked new students in their fifth to ninth week of Fall quarter whether, "So far at Western, [they had] felt the need for advisement in ...[a] selecting a major, [b] understanding

⁵ Alternatively, shortcomings in recall may have moved reports more toward the first quarter of a year for those who decided the longest time ago.

major requirements or getting into a major”, and [c] selecting courses to prepare for entry into a major.” The same question was repeated in our Spring quarter follow-up of these same students, regarding their need for advising during Winter quarter. While the question of advising needs is addressed in a separate report, we use these data here to examine the question of sequencing - when entering students feel a need for advising relative to the major.

Advising needs differ, of course, between transfers and native freshmen. This is reflected in Figure 3, which shows the percentage of freshmen and transfers who reported needing advice regarding each of three aspects concerning entry to a major.



The findings displayed in Figure 3 suggest several conclusions concerning the timing of need for advising regarding the major:

- Transfers' need for advising regarding the major is heavily concentrated at their entrance to Western. Over one-half of new transfers felt a need during their first quarter to gain advising concerning the requirements for majors and courses to take in preparation for a major, and 38.5% wanted advice concerning the choice of a major. By their second quarter at Western, the felt need for advising in two of these areas fell to half the Fall quarter need, and need in the third area fell by one-sixth.
- The freshman need for advising in these areas begins lower than transfers' need and does not decline by Winter quarter. This moderate and unchanging need for advising is consistent with the fact that most freshmen remain partially or completely undecided about a major field throughout their first year, with most final major decisions are made during sophomore and junior years.
- Fewer students feel a need for advising assistance with the largest question--selecting which field to major in--than with more specific informational questions surrounding the major--how to get into a major and how to prepare for the major. In particular, for both freshmen and transfers, need for information about major requirements and entry remains higher than for other issues during Winter quarter. This finding challenges the naive assumption that students' need for advising regarding majors arises when they are at the stage of making a decision and then vanishes. While timing of the decision certainly affects need for advising, many freshmen want advising well before seriously approaching a decision point and a considerable number of the transfers who have decided on a probable major nonetheless wish advising concerning entry into the major.

The assumption that advising needs regarding majors is tied closely to whether or not a student has selected an intended major is further challenged by the analysis of advising needs by whether a student is a "declared" major, has an "intended" major, or is undecided. These categories appear to mean somewhat different things for freshmen and transfers, and to be less absolute in any case than one might assume.

We can select students who, by late in their first quarter, were declared, intended, and undecided, and compare their reported need for advisement during Winter quarter. For transfers, we find the expected pattern. Need for advisement concerning the choice of majors drops from 55.5% for the few undecideds, to 26.4% for those with intended majors, and to 9.4% for those with declared majors. It remains intriguing that nearly one in ten declared majors still feels a need for advisement regarding the choice of majors, but most need for this type of advising has, in fact, ended for those with decided majors. For freshmen, on the other hand, need for advising regarding the choice of majors falls only from 31.9% for undecideds to 28.3% for those with intended majors, and to 25.0% for the few who report a declared major. At this stage in the college career, the meaning of a major decision appears to remain less fixed than for older students.

The Process of Deciding on a Major Field

A final point concerning advising and major choice is particularly interesting to the question of when and how students choose a major. The longitudinal nature of our “close-in” surveys allows us to examine the possible impact of receiving advising on the ability to make a decision as to major field. We can take into account whether a student was a declared or intended or undecided major in Fall, and then examine whether receiving advising in Winter quarter influenced whether they were declared, intended, or undecided in Spring. The finding is that students who felt a need for advising regarding majors and received it during Winter increased their probability of moving from undecided to intended or from intended to declared by 25.1%, compared to students who felt no need for advising and by 27.5% compared to students who felt a need for advising but did not receive it. The second of these findings is especially powerful since both groups of students say they felt a need for advising. Simply being ready for advising may precede making a decision, but that readiness was not translated into decision unless the advising was sought out and received.

One of the things students can do along the way to deciding on a major field is eliminate particular majors or types of majors. In Spring of their first year at Western, about one-third (36.0%) of students who remained “undecided” about a major reported that they had been able to eliminate certain fields. The question of interest is on what basis they were able to eliminate fields. They might have received advice from parents or friends, considered occupational futures, considered the time it would take to complete a degree, sought out academic advising, attended major fairs, etc.

While some of these steps may have been taken, the overwhelming method reported by students is based on experience with the fields eliminated. Three-fourths (74.5%) say they simply do not enjoy the field, either on the basis of high school courses or college courses. A closely related response by another 5.9% is preferring other fields. Another 11.8% say their grades in the eliminated field(s) were low or that aspects of the major are too difficult or too time-consuming. Various other more specific factors were mentioned by a final 7.8%.

Presumably because they represent a rather clear contrast to other fields and because students have extensive high school experience with them, math and sciences were the fields most often eliminated by these students who remained undecided but had limited the field. Over half (60.0%) of the fields eliminated were math/science; one-in-six had eliminated one or all of the humanities, with the remainder spread evenly over other fields.

We asked those who remained “undecided” in Spring quarter how often “during the last two months [they thought] about what to major in.” While some (9.2%) said they “never” thought about the issue and others (11.5%) only once or twice, most students clearly had the issue on their minds. Two-fifths (42.0%) said they thought about what to major in “often,” and another 37.3% said “occasionally.” It seems quite clear that for most students, freshmen included, the issue of choosing a major is actively pursued, even in freshman year. There are few the university might need to goad.

We also asked all those who remained undecided in Spring to list all the “... kinds of things you have done since you came to Western to help you decide on a major field” and to evaluate how helpful each was. The results indicate a range of activities, although the most common was

experiential--taking classes. Findings are displayed in Table 3. Again, the most frequent activity was taking classes to see what the subject material is like. Over three-fifths (61.1%) took classes in part to explore a major, and half, 49.7%, found the exercise "very valuable." The other techniques most often reported involve seeking information from the logical available "others"--professors and departmental advisors, students, advising offices, and printed materials. Although fewest drew on printed materials, these were most often highly satisfactory. The Academic Advising Services or Career Services offices were least often viewed as valuable.

Table 3. Activities in which "Undecided" Students Engaged to Explore Major Fields, New Student Survey, Fall 1994

	Percent (N) Who Did Each*	Percent Giving Each Rating		
		Very Valuable	In Between	Not Valuable
Took classes	60.1 (161)	49.7	41.7	8.6
Consulted profs, dept'l advisors	16.0 (43)	44.7	44.7	10.5
Talked with other students	14.6 (39)	46.1	51.3	2.6
Visited ac. advising or career services	7.8 (21)	28.6	28.6	42.8
Consulted catalogues, books	7.1 (19)	61.1	38.9	0.0
Attended seminars, major fairs	3.0 (8)	a	a	a
Consulted family/friends at home	2.6 (11)	a	a	a
Consulted employers in field	2.2 (6)	a	a	a
Did nothing	17.5 (47)	b	b	b
TOTAL	130.9%			

*Percentages add to more than 100% because up to two responses were allowed for each.

a Too few responses for percentages to be meaningful.

b No activity to evaluate.

This is consistent with past assessment studies that showed academic advising most successful with specific, focused requests and least so with broad life questions, such as what major to choose (Simpson, et. al., 1993).

The emphasis in students' reports on course experience as a key to deciding on a major leads to our next question concerning the process of deciding on a major: How many courses do

students take in their eventual major field before deciding on that major and before formally declaring the major? In part, this translates to how many of the non-majors enrolled in non-GUR courses at Western are, in fact, would-be majors.

One third (31.1%) of all advanced juniors and seniors decided on the major they wanted before taking any college courses in the field. At the other extreme, 8.8% took nine or more courses in the field before deciding. The bulk of students (44.6%), however, take a modest one to three courses before deciding, with another 1.5% taking four or five courses. These findings vary little by transfer versus native status, since the question was number of courses at any institution.

As would be expected, students took considerably more courses before declaring than before deciding on a major. Only 21.7% declared before taking any courses and 19.3% took nine or more courses before declaring.⁶ We can calculate how many more (or fewer) courses each student took before deciding on a major than before declaring. This lag may represent a period of final solidification of the decision. It is also a period when the student is in fact taking the major but the departmental planning efforts do not yet have the benefit of that knowledge.

The modal lag between deciding on a major and declaring it, reported by 51.4% of all students, is zero courses; that is, these students decided and declared at the same time. Only 5.4% report declaring the major before actually deciding that they wanted to major in that field. We do not know how many of these early declarations were for purposes of gaining access to restricted majors. Nor do we know how many students declared a major and never decided to major in that field. It is clear, however, that relatively few students are declaring prematurely.

The remaining 44.2% of students in our survey decided they wanted to major in their current major fields at least one course before they actually declared. The finding most fascinating, and perhaps problematic, for the university is that one in five (19.9%) waited at least four courses after deciding on a major to declare it. One-fourth of students (24.3%) recall declaring one (9.0%), two (7.8%), or three (7.5%) courses after deciding. The longest reported delay, by 2.2% of students, was "nine or more" courses. These students had decided on a major before taking any courses in it, yet completed "nine or more" courses (the highest level allowed by our answer scale) before declaring. In some of Western's majors, nine courses is more than three-fourths of the way to completion of the major.

For all those students who took five or more courses in a major before declaring it (39.0%), we asked "What were your reasons for delaying your formal declaration of the major?" Our concern was to learn whether students were waiting to raise their GPAs enough to gain admission to a major, or were blocked from a series of entry requirements. As it happens, the great majority of students we interviewed said either that they did not feel they were delaying, that it did not seem like an issue, (62.5%); that various personal factors had led them to forget or procrastinate (19.9%); or that they took the additional courses elsewhere and had to wait until they transferred to declare at Western (9.2%). Only 1.6% said they were delayed by admissions

⁶ Since some of the students in our sample had not yet officially declared their majors, these figures are underestimates.

criteria or admissions requirements, and 0.3% said they had to wait for required courses. Another 1.2% took extra time because they did not know how or where to declare, and 1.3% say they were still tentative about their decision.

These reasons are consistent with the finding that the average number of courses completed prior to declaration of the major varies extremely little across colleges. CBE and Fairhaven majors report taking slightly more than average, but this has to do primarily with what students are counting as being a part of their major. Fine and Performing Arts majors took slightly fewer than others, with the rest clustered very tightly around the average for all Western students.

In short, viewed from this vantage point, at least, Western has no reason to be concerned about cumbersome entrance requirements to the major. Of course, this vantage point does not include students who were discouraged from ever declaring a major and decided to change majors instead.

Our survey of advanced juniors and seniors provides some information concerning reasons for leaving majors. All those who had changed majors while at Western were asked to "...explain the main factors that led you to leave [that major]." Two-fifths of the sample explained why they had left at least one major while at Western, of whom 5.9% reported on two previous majors and 1.7% reported on three. The types of reasons they gave, coded from their open-ended responses, are summarized in table 4.

Consistent with other findings, students' most frequent reason by far for changing majors (57.1%) is that they were guided by their interests, which changed (see Table 4). We may speculate that their interests changed primarily because of their experience with courses in their old and new majors. For another 19.4%, that speculation is supported by the student's explicit report that they left the old major because they were dissatisfied with some aspect of that department. Also, about one in four major changers gave one or two highly practical reasons for changing majors: that career opportunities were limited in the old major (12.8%), that the old major required too much work or was too difficult (8.3%), or that the student's grades in the old major were too low (5.5%).

In addition, we do see some evidence here of access problems and time-to-degree problems, although their impact remains modest. Nine percent of changes in majors while at Western were occasioned by being denied access into the major of first choice (see Table 4). This translates to 3.6% of all Western upperclassmen. While that percentage is not great, it does mean that somewhere between 150 and 200 upperclassmen at any one time are in second choice majors because they were unable to gain access into their first choice majors. Another 5.2% of major changers say their primary reason was because the old major required too many credits and would have taken too long to complete. This percentage of all students is small, at 2.1% of all upperclassmen.

**Table 4. Reasons Given for Leaving a Previously Declared Major,
Survey of Advanced Juniors and Seniors, Winter 1995**

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Percent*</u>
Changed interests	57.1
Disliked aspects of previous department	19.4
Career/job opportunities limited	12.8
Denied access to previous major	9.0
Too much work; too difficult	8.3
Poor academic performance	5.5
Too many credits; too long to complete	5.2
Other, concerning WWU	8.3
Other, concerning self	<u>5.2</u>
TOTAL	130.8 (N=289)

* Percentages add to more than 100% because some students left more than one major and some offered more than one reason for doing so.

Criteria for Selecting a Major Field

Western's alumni surveys have asked students to identify how important various criteria were for their choice of major fields. Now, with our surveys of new students and upper-class students, we can report on the importance of these criteria prior to the selection of a major and while students are still in the process of completing majors. Entering students were asked whether each of five factors was "...a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason why you would pick a particular field as a major." Our advanced junior and senior sample was asked to rate nine criteria. Findings are displayed in Figure 2, with entering students separated into transfers and native freshmen.

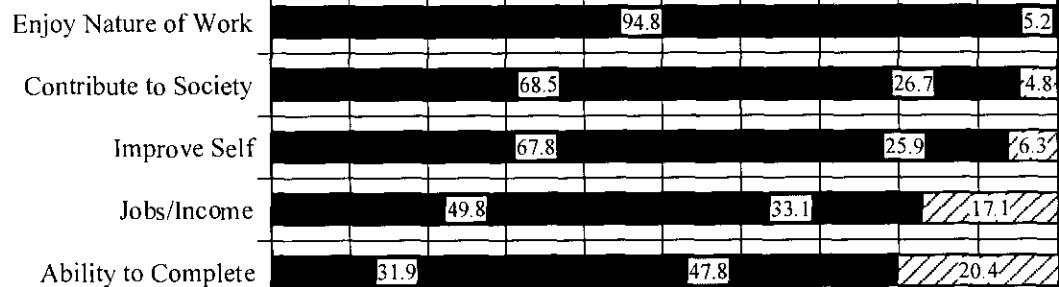
BEGIN DISCUSSION HERE

**Figure 4. Reasons Why Students Choose a Particular Field as a Major:
WWU Survey of Entering Freshmen and Transfers, Fall 1994,
and Survey of Students with 100+ credits, Winter 1995**

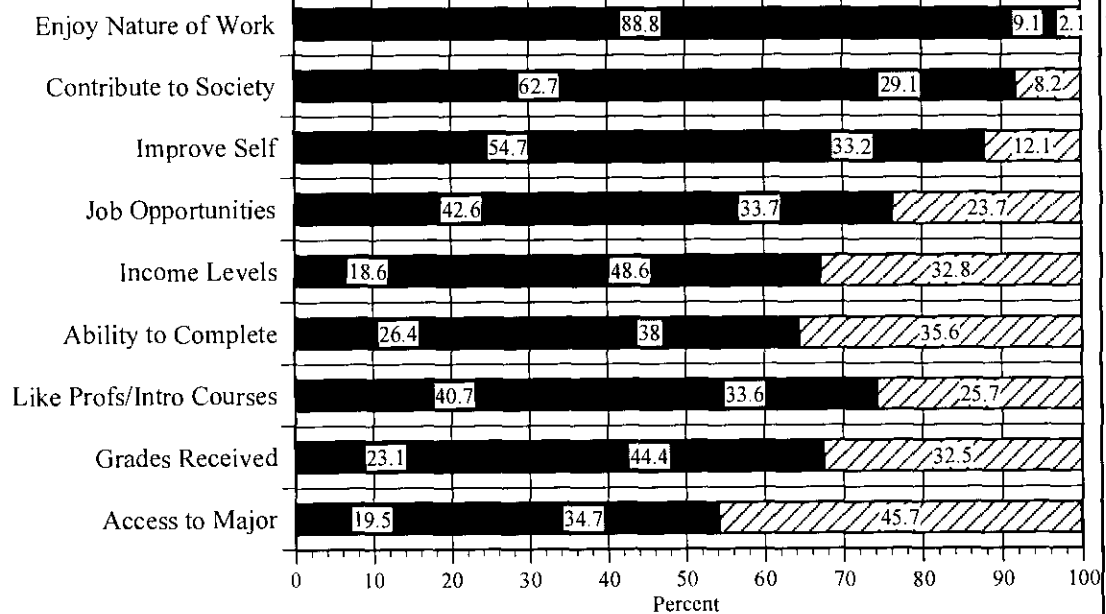
Entering Freshmen



Entering Transfers



Students w/ 100+ credits



■ Major Reason ■ Minor Reason ▨ Not a Reason

discussion here, cont.

One other question concerning students' criteria for deciding on a major was included in this survey: how central a major is to their reasons for attending college. They were asked: "Some people are definite about a major because they know the exact field they want to work in. Others simply select a major in order to finish college. Which category would you say you fall into, or are you in-between?"

While a minority of student (6.4%) responded that they selected "any major" in order to complete, these represent a division of nearly all university student bodies that is typically overlooked or undervalued by universities. These students want a college degree, but not a particular career line developed by a major. They would, presumably, be as happy without any major field or with a broad, generic major. Another fourth of upper division students (24.6%) say they fall "in-between." Since it is normative to respond that one has a definite preference for a major, we may assume that these in-between people share a great deal in common with the smaller group that explicates a lack of urgency concerning choice of majors.

Table 5. Percent of Each of Three Groups Who Say That Each Criterion is a "Major Reason" for Selection of Major Field (N=714)

		<u>Student Prefers a Major in:*</u>		
		Definite Field	In Between	Any Major
Job Opportunities in the Field	Major Reason	47.9	31.5	29.9
	Minor Reason	31.5	37.2	41.1
	Not a Reason	20.5	31.3	29.0
Enjoy Nature of the Work	Major Reason	91.2	87.5	67.9
	Minor Reason	7.3	9.7	26.0
	Not a Reason	1.5	2.8	6.1
Could Contribute to Society in this Field	Major Reason	66.3	58.8	39.9
	Minor Reason	27.3	30.8	43.7
	Not a Reason	6.4	10.4	16.3
Income Levels in this Field	Major Reason	20.5	13.6	18.1
	Minor Reason	47.8	51.1	45.6
	Not a Reason	31.7	35.2	36.3
Improve Self as a Person	Major Reason	53.3	60.7	47.9
	Minor Reason	34.7	28.4	37.4
	Not a Reason	12.0	10.9	14.7
Grades Received in this Field	Major Reason	23.2	21.7	27.1
	Minor Reason	43.6	46.7	46.1
	Not a Reason	33.3	31.6	26.9
Like Professors or Introductory Courses	Major Reason	40.0	45.6	29.3
	Minor Reason	34.8	30.0	36.6
	Not a Reason	25.2	24.4	34.1
Ability to Complete Major Within an Acceptable Time	Major Reason	20.3	37.2	52.3
	Minor Reason	40.8	33.8	23.8
	Not a Reason	38.9	29.0	23.9
Ability to Gain Admission into the Major	Major Reason	19.5	17.4	28.5
	Minor Reason	35.6	35.0	25.5
	Not a Reason	44.8	47.6	46.0

* Full Question: a) Some people are definite about their major because they know the exact field they want to work in. Others simply select a major in order to finish college. Which category would you say you fall into, or are you in-between? b) Please indicate whether each factor listed is a Major reason, a Minor reason, or Not a reason why you would pick a particular field as a major.

discussion and conclusion to this section

then add section on policy implications

cut this, probably:

In short, the process of choosing a major begins long before the final choice for most students, involves numerous changes of intended majors for many students, and is made primarily on the basis of direct experience with each field, through taking courses, and secondarily on the basis of information from various others. Although students' stated need for advising concerning major choice is considerable, relatively little evidence points to the impact of advising at Western as influencing this decision.

ADD A SECTION ON POLICY IMPLICATIONS LATER

The findings displayed in Figure 1 speak to two policy decisions now before the Western community. One is whether to require students to declare a major by 100 credits. Since more than nine-tenths of students with over 100 credits are declared (or consider themselves so) and since most others have identified intended majors, such a policy is unlikely to cause either undue stress to students or any substantial change in the process by which students declare majors.

One proviso is worth mention, however. Members of this sample have all been at Western at least two quarters. Looking at transfers, we see a substantial portion who decide during their first two quarters at Western. Bearing in mind that students may need exposure to Western departments and that some students transfer into Western with substantial numbers of credits, any cutoff such as 100 credits could perhaps be applied only to students who have been at Western one or perhaps two quarters.⁷ This issue overlaps with the next.

add to declaring at transfer the finding of how many say it would hurt/help and the breakdown by AA vs. other transfer and by # credits transferred in.

class of '91 - if declared at entry - better=17.5%; no diff = 62.1%; worse = 20.4% (overall - will be diff by type of transfer - q33 by q30

A second policy under consideration at Western is whether to require some or all transfers to declare the major as part of their admission to Western. Combining all new transfers, Figure 1 shows us that 94.4% have at least an intended major by their fifth week at Western. On the other hand, fewer than half feel clear enough to call themselves declared. This means that a requirement to declare as part of admission would force a substantial number of false positives.

advising - emphasis on first two years, esp second, for univ wide advising. emphasis on depts otherwise.

⁷ Of the Class of '93, 13.7% transferred in 100 or more credits; 4.6% brought in 130 or more credits.